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XV.—THE SOURCE IN ART OF THE SO-CALLED *PROPHETS PLAY* IN THE HEGGE COLLECTION

The seventh play in the Hegge collection of English mystery plays is unique: in it is to be found a striking, and I believe hitherto unnoted, influence of art. James Orchard Halliwell, in his edition of the Hegge plays,¹ calls this play "The Prophets." But whatever its superficial likeness to the liturgical *Processus Prophetarum*, and other prophet plays, it is my conviction that this single English play is directly influenced by—indeed, largely derived from—that pictorial representation of the genealogy of Christ which is known in art as the *Tree of Jesse*, *Stirps Jesse*, or *Radix Jesse*.

In order to make this matter clear, I must first set forth what is meant by the *Tree of Jesse*; how it was usually represented; what its probable age; and what the extent of its dissemination. Then a brief consideration of the play will indicate the chain of relationship between the iconographic and the dramatic form.

It is convenient to begin with the prescription for the representing of the tree of Jesse, found in that Byzantine Guide to Painting discovered by M. Adolphe Napoléon Didron:

"The righteous Jesse sleeps. Out of the lower part of his breast spring three branches; the two smaller ones surround him, the third and larger one rises erect and entwines round the figures of Hebrew kings from David to Christ. The first is David; he holds a harp. Then comes Solomon; and after him, the other kings following

¹ *Ludus Coventriæ*, etc., London, Shakespeare Society, 1841.

in their order and holding sceptres. At the top of the stem, the birth of Christ. On each side, in the midst of the branches, are the prophets with their prophetic scrolls; they point out Christ, and gaze upon Him. Below the prophets, the sages of Greece and the soothsayer Balaam, each holding their [*sic*] scrolls. They look upwards and point towards the Nativity of Christ.”²

The tree of Jesse, then, is the family tree of Christ, in which Jesse occupies the position of the first great ancestor, the founder of the line. It is a pictorial representation of the middle part of the genealogy given by Saint Matthew (*Matt.* i, 6-16)³—that part which is royal. Its apparent intention is to establish the title of Christ to the throne of Israel. The whole symbol takes its rise from the prophecy of Isaiah:

Et egredietur virga de radice Jesse, et flos de radice ejus ascendet (Is. xi, 1).

² Didron, *Christian Iconography, translated from the French by E. J. Millington, London, 1851.*

³ Saint Matthew begins the genealogy of Christ with Abraham and traces the line through Jesse, by David, Solomon, and the other kings of Israel; and after the end of the kings—in the Babylonian captivity—through men who were not kings, to Joseph, the husband of Mary. Thus by Jewish law Christ was the descendant of Jesse, and the son of David. Saint Luke on the other hand traces the genealogy of Christ backwards from Mary (thus the learned commentators interpret *Luke* iii, 23) through a non-royal line to David, and so on back to Adam, “who was of God.”

It was natural that in the middle ages interpretative comment, playing somewhat upon words, should seek a mystic significance in the similarity between *virga* of Isaiah’s prophecy and the word *virgo*. But though with the increase of the worship of the Virgin there might be a shifting of the emphasis from the line through Joseph to that through Mary, the pictorial tree of Jesse persisted as a kingly line headed by David and Solomon.

Thus we find Jesse reclining at the root of the tree in much the posture of the founder of any ancient noble family in old charts.

The prophets in the pictured tree are there to support and reinforce by their inspired word the central idea. "They point out Christ and gaze upon him." They fill out the design, preserving a certain balance or proportion in number with the central figures. They are among the branches of the tree but not of them; or else they merely stand at the sides. There are representations of the tree of Jesse from which the prophets are lacking. When they are present, Isaiah is often recognisable—*e. g.*, in the painting of the Romanesque wood ceiling of St. Michael's at Hildesheim—by his cartel bearing the word *Egredietur*.

The Byzantine Guide to Painting, discovered by M. Didron among the monks of Mt. Athos, though the oldest manuscript be not more than three centuries old, is in considerable part of its prescription much older. M. Chas. Bayet⁴ attributes its tradition to the ninth or tenth century, or even earlier. Other critics, notably M. Charles Diehl,⁵ are inclined to regard the work as so modified and contaminated in the transmission, as to be unreliable. M. Diehl would not venture to put it earlier than the fifteenth century.

Be that as it may, it is a well known fact that the source of a large part of the symbolism and traditional representation of Christian art in Europe lay in the manuscript illuminations and ivory carvings of Byzantium.⁶ Moreover, what seems to be the earliest recorded Jesse tree in

⁴ Ch. Bayet, *L'Art Byzantin*, Paris, 1904.

⁵ Charles Diehl, *Manuel d'Art Byzantin*.

⁶ See, for example, Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire Raisonné de l'Architecture*, under the article *Vierge*.

Europe was, according to the Abbé Corblet, brought from the Orient: "Nous savons qu'en 1097 Guillaume de Tournay fit venir d'Orient un candélabre d'airain en forme d'arbre de Jessé." It might have been this same candlestick which Hugo de Flori, abbot of St. Augustine's, Canterbury, bought for the choir in the same year—1097: "Candelabrum magnum in choro aereum quod Jesse vocatur in partibus emit transmarinis."⁷

The earliest Jesse tree in a church window was probably that at Saint-Denis, described by the abbot Suger as

Stirps Jesse in capite ecclesiae

among the new glass windows of notable variety which he had painted for him by

*magistorum multorum de diversis nationibus manu exquisita.*⁸

This was about 1140-1144. The window at Chartres, —according to M. Emile Mâle, in the chapter on glass in Michel's history of art, a replica or copy of Suger's at Saint-Denis,—is fortunately in a good state of preservation to this day.

At York Minster another Jesse window was put in place in the latter half of the twelfth century, after 1159. M. Mâle ventures the opinion that this window was also a duplicate of that at Saint-Denis, and even that it was made in France. The window at Chartres, then, is the oldest and best example we have of the tree of Jesse during what is sometimes called the period of Byzantine influence.

⁷ Corblet, *Etude Iconographique sur l'arbre de Jessé*, in *Revue de l'Art Chrétien*, 1860.

⁸ A. Lecoy de la Marche, *Œuvres Complètes de Suger*, Paris, 1867.

The following table, by no means complete, but serving somewhat to show the extent of the dissemination of the tree of Jesse, is compiled from an article by the Abbé Corblet in the *Revue de l'Art Chrétien* and from standard works on art by Didron, Michel, Lübke, Reber, Venturi, Lewis F. Day.

XI CENTURY

Candlesticks *Belgium* (?), and *Canterbury* 1097.

XII CENTURY

Windows:

Saint-Denis, 1140-1144	} derivative of Saint-Denis
Chartres, c. 1149	
York Minster, after 1159	
Mans	

Painted wood ceiling:

St. Michael's, Hildesheim, 1186

Sculpture:

Parma, Baptistry

XIII CENTURY

Windows:

Amiens
Troyes
Reims
Paris, Sainte Chapelle
Wells
Saint-Cunibert de Cologne

Sculpture:

Laon, main door and vaulting of door
Chartres, door
Amiens, door

Miniature:

Psalter of Queen Ingeburge, c. 1236 (Mus. Condé)
Bible historique, (Biblio. de Reims, ms. $\frac{28}{18}$)

XIV CENTURY

Miniature:

St. Omer psalter, (English ms. begun 1325. Ref. in
Burl. Mag. XIII, 269)

Psalter, (Probably English, Biblio. Douai, MS. 171)
 Speculum humanæ salvationis (Biblio. Arsenal, MS.
 Theol. Lat. 42).

Sculpture:

Orvieto cathedral, c. 1330 (Very elaborate, on pilasters)
 Longpont, (alabaster. Cf. Corblet)

In the fifteenth century the examples in sculpture, in painting, and in different kinds of decorative art, are very numerous and show a great variety of design. A splendid example of a fifteenth-century Jesse window is that at Dorchester in Oxfordshire. The subject was so popular that it was employed even in decorating private residences.

But, for all changes of detail, the essential design remains: the righteous Jesse sleeps, lying at the foot of the tree, or with the tree growing out of his body; the tree, or vine, bears the royal ancestors of Christ, sometimes represented by only three or four; and generally—especially in the windows, and in the Hildesheim ceiling—the prophets form a border, flanking the kings; at the summit is Christ.

Turning now to a consideration of the play, I shall endeavor to show that it ought not to be called "The Prophets," but rather "The Tree of Jesse," or "The Rote of Jesse" (*radix Jesse*); and after that I shall show what I believe to be its indebtedness to the Tree, or Root, of Jesse in art.

In the first place the title "The Prophets" does not occur in the manuscript.⁹ This name was foisted upon the text by Halliwell, who mistook it for a simple evolu-

⁹ Though I have not been able to examine the MS. myself, I have it on the authority of Dr. Karl Young, who has examined and made careful notes upon it, that the words "The Prophets" do not occur at the head of this play.

tion of the prophet play. In casting about for a title, it is odd that he did not refer to the prologue to the cycle,¹⁰ which describes the play thus:

Off the gentyl *Jesse rote*
 The sefnt pagent forsothe xal ben
 Out of the whiche doth sprynge oure bote
 As in propheeye we redyn and sen;
 Kyngys and prophetes with wordys fful sote,
 Schulle prophesye al of a qwene. . . .

At the end of the play, moreover, stands this rubric:
Explicit Jesse.

When we begin to read the text, we observe that the first speaker, Isaiah, who pronounces the more familiar of his prophecies—*virgo concipiet et pariet filium*—is followed immediately by a speaker designated in the rubric as *Radix Jesse*. This speaker, as it were taking the words out of Isaiah's mouth, gives that prophecy of Isaiah which we have seen was the inspiration of artists:

Egredietur virga de radice Jesse
Et flos de radice ejus ascendet.

It is indeed Jesse who speaks, in his capacity of root of the genealogical tree, for he continues thus:

A blyssyd braunch xal sprynge of me
 That xal be swettere than bawmys brethe;
 Oute of that braunche, in Nazareth
 A flowre xal blome of me, Jesse rote,
 The whiche by grace xal dystroye dethe,
 And brynge mankende to blysse most sote.

The next speaker is Jesse's son, the first king in the line of Christ's ancestors, *Davyd Rex*:

¹⁰ The prologue certainly belongs to the first seven plays in the Hegge collection.

I am David, of Jesse rote
 The fresche kyng by naturelle successyon,
 And of my blood xal sprynge oure bote. . . .

Following David comes the prophet Jeremiah, and thereafter the kings alternate regularly with prophets, so that each king save the last comes between two prophets. In all there are thirteen prophets and thirteen kings: the line of ancestors including Jesse, therefore, comprises fourteen.

Now it is to be noted that the prophets in our play are not all chosen because of the significance of their scriptural prophecies. In the first place, in the case of *Jeremias*, *Ozyas* (*i. e.*, *Hosea*), and *Sophosas*, they supply no prophecy of their own, but merely echo that of Isaiah.

For example:

Jeremias—

I am the prophete Jeremye,
 And fulliche accorde in alle sentence
 With king David and with Ysaie. . . .

Ozyas—

Off that byrthe wyttnes bere I,
 A prophete Osyas men me calle,
 And aftyr that tale of Isaye,
 That mayd xal bere Emanuelle.

In the second place, the prophecies are in some cases obscure and incorrect. Thus the prophecy of Daniel—

I prophete Danyel am welle apayed
 In figure of this I saw a tre;
 All the fendys of helle xalle ben affrayd
 Whan maydenys ffrute theron thei se. . . .

seems to be an incorrect allusion to *Daniel* iv, 10 et seq., wherein we read of Nebuchadnezzar's vision of a great tree reaching to heaven. The author of our play, in my opin-

ion, brings in this vision of the tree because he wishes a prophecy appropriate to a representation of the tree of Jesse.¹¹ Though the same metaphor is sometimes employed in allusion to the cross—the tree on which is the fruit of a maid—such an interpretation is only partially satisfactory here. Daniel says, “In fygure of this I saw a tre”: surely it is permissible to find in this a double allusion.

That the genealogical tree is the central and dominant theme of the whole piece is further attested by the speech of *Aggeus propheta*, the prophet Haggai, who following King Joathan’s boast, “Of my kynrede God wol be man,” says:

With yow I do holde that am prophete Aggee,
Come of the same hygh and holy stok,
God of oure kynrede in dede born wyl be. . . .

Thus prophecy is subordinated to the claim of kinship in the same high and holy stock.

Prophets and their prophecies, then, seem to be included with a view to filling out a predetermined number. The author seems rather put to it to find a suitable speech for every one. But if he had been directly indebted to the *Processus Prophetarum*, or other prophet plays, he would scarcely have been at such a loss; for in that case he would have had an appropriate prophecy together with each prophet. Needless to say, had he chosen his prophets for the special significance of their prophecies, he would not have been confronted with any such problem. Why does he wish just thirteen prophets? It may be because the num-

¹¹ The customary prophecy for Daniel in the prophet plays is that of the pseudo-Augustinian sermon (cf. M. Sepet, *Les Prophètes du Christ*)—*Cum venerit sanctus sanctorum cessabit unctio vestra*. This is not found in the Vulgate.

ber is regarded as sacred, it may possibly be due to some influence of the *Processus Prophetarum*,¹² or it may be simply to fill out the plan of having the prophets alternate with the kings. It is interesting to note here a typical arrangement of the pictured tree. In the Chartres window there are seven persons in the tree and fourteen prophets in the border.

Why are there thirteen kings? The answer is not hard to find: it lies in that same passage of the gospel of St. Matthew which together with Isaiah's prophecy of the branch out of the root of Jesse furnished the basis for the iconographic tree. St. Matthew divides the genealogy of Christ into three parts of fourteen each—from Abraham to David, from David to the Babylonian captivity, and from the captivity to Christ. The middle division, —the royal line,—appears in the play with the exception of the last two kings, Josiah and Jechonias. The playwright, having begun with Jesse and David—whereas St. Matthew begins his second group with Solomon—completes the tally of fourteen at Amon and there stops. The list from Jesse to Amon agrees exactly with that in the gospel. Inasmuch as the evangelist, doubtless influenced by a sense of sacredness in number (fourteen being a multiple of seven) has given a list that does not entirely agree with the Old Testament, there is little doubt that this is the source of the names and the determination of the number of the kings in our play.

The playwright could not readily have depended upon the pictured tree for names and number, because the kings

¹² The pseudo-Augustinian sermon pointed out by M. Sepet as the source of the *Processus Prophetarum*, and the Limoges *Processus*, have each just thirteen prophets; but the prophets of our play correspond with neither of these groups save in the case of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Habbakuk.

being the chief persons in the design were generally shown much larger than the prophets, and, space on this account lacking, they were in consequence restricted to a representative few. Thus while David and Solomon were almost always recognizable, the number and identification of the other kings was a matter determined by the exigencies of the medium. I may mention, for what it may be worth, that a fifteenth-century fresco in the Buurkerke at Utrecht indicates by name exactly thirteen kings, ending with Amon. They correspond, with one exception, with those in the play.

Let us now, skipping the prophets who alternate with them, consider the kings and their speeches. This will show better than anything else how the play is built up on the central theme of the genealogical tree.

David, who in the regular prophet plays is a chief prophet, here heads the line of kings, and instead of giving voice to one of the many prophecies from the psalms, is content to announce himself the son of Jesse—"of Jesse rote,"—the ancestor of Christ, and to echo the prophecy of Isaiah.

Salamon Rex.

I am Salamon the secunde kynge.

Roboas Rex.

The iij.de kynge of the jentyllie Jesse

My name is knowe, kynge Roboas,

Of our kynrede yitt men xul se

A clene mayde trede down foule Sathanas.

Abias Rex.

I, that am calde kynge Abias

Conferme for trewe that ye han seyd. . . .

Asa Rex.

I kynge Asa, beleve alle this. . . .

Josophat rex.

And I, Josophat, the vj.te kynge serteyne

Of Jesse rote in the lenyalle successyon,
All that my progenitouris hath befor me seyn. . . .

Joras Rex.

And I, Joras, also in the number of sefne
Of Jesse rote kyng. . . .

Ozias Rex.

And I Ozyas, kyng of hygh degré,
Spronge of Jesse rote. . . .

Joathas rex.

My name is knowe kyng Joathan
The ix.e kyng spronge of Jesse. . . .

Achas rex.

Off Jesse kyng Achas is my name. . . .

Ezechias rex.

The xj.te kyng of this genealogye. . . .

Manasses rex.

Of this nobylle and wurthy generacion
The xij.te kyng am I Manasses. . . .

The last speaker in the play, King Amon, pronounces
a sort of epilogue—

Amon rex.

Amon kyng, ffor the last conclusyon,
Al thyng beforn seyde ffor trowthe do testyfie,
Praynge that lord of oure synne remysyon,
At that dredful day he graunt mercye.

Thus we alle of this genealogye,
Accordinge in on here in this place,
Pray that hey, lorde whan that we xal dye,
Of his gret goodnesse to grawnt us his grace!

Then come the words *Explicit Jesse*,—the play of Jesse
is ended.

There seems to be no ascertainable source for the play
as a play of the *Tree*, or *Root*, of *Jesse*, save in art. M.
Sepet cites a reference to a Corpus Christi procession of
prophets followed by a procession of Kings descended from
Jesse, with their father, Jesse, which took place at May-

enne about 1655.¹³ But this is too late to be of importance to us, even though we agreed with the suggestion that it is referable to some earlier mysteries at Laval.

It is curious that Dr. Paul Weber, seeking explanation for the occurrence of *Roboam* and *Jese* in a row of prophets on a little ivory casket of the end of the eleventh or beginning of the twelfth century, points triumphantly to our play, with the comment that 'Roboam' and 'Jese' are found also among the prophets in the English *Ludus*

¹³ L'Idée de faire paraître à côté des prophètes proprement dits la lignée de Jessé, les rois de Juda, fils de David et ancêtres du Messie, n'est pas particulière au *Ludus Coventriæ*. La scène a certainement eu ce caractère dans des mystères français, comme le prouve le passage suivant d'une description des usages encore observé au commencement du XVII^e siècle dans les cérémonies de la Fête-Dieu de Mayenne. Nous empruntons ce passage aux savants *Recherches sur les mystères qui ont été représentés dans le Maine* par le R. P. Dom P. Piolin, Bénédictin de la Congrégation de France (Angers, 1858, broch. in 8°, p. 45).

"On fit vers ce temps (vers 1655), dit l'abbé Guyard de la Fosse, une grande réforme en la solennité de la procession de la Fête-Dieu, qui passoit pour célèbre à Mayenne. Voici ce qui s'y observoit: après les deux bannières, marchaient deux personnes représentant Adam et Ève, au milieu desquelles on portoit un petit arbre chargé de pommes, avec la figure d'un serpent. Ensuite paraissent ceux qui représentoient les patriarches et les prophètes, vêtus de soutanes et manteaux de différentes couleurs, avec de grandes barbes et des perruques, portant sur le dos un écriteau du nom du personnage de chacun, comme d'Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moïse, Isaïe, Jérémie, etc., leur nombre étoit fini par Saint Jean-Baptiste couvert d'une peau de chameau, et portant un agneau. Après eux venoient les rois descendus de Jessé, comme David, Salomon, etc., habillés magnifiquement, la couronne sur la tête et le sceptre à la main. Ils étoient suivis de leur père Jessé, qui avoit une grande chevelure blanche, une robe fourrée, et s'appuyoit sur un bâton. . . ."

C'est avec toute raison que le savant bénédictin rapprochant ces usages des mystères représentés plus anciennement à Laval, le jour de la Fête-Dieu . . . dit que "les acteurs étaient descendus de leurs planches et marchaient dans la rue" (Marius Sepet, *Les Prophètes du Christ*, Paris, 1878, p. 168, note).

Coventriae. Weber is looking at the art representations for evidence of the existence of earlier prophet plays. He overlooks the fact that Roboam is distinctly labeled *rex*, and that Jesse is neither king nor prophet.¹⁴ In speaking of the intrusion of the ancestors of Christ into the ranks of the prophets, he seems unconscious of the convention of the tree of Jesse. Ernst Falke in a special study of the sources, merely echoes Sepet¹⁵ in referring to the *Processus*.

The play most likely derived the names of the kings from the liturgy for Christmas day, in the reading from St. Matthew. But as we have seen, the line in the gospel begins with Abraham, and is not even divided in such a way as to make Jesse prominent.

The subject, moreover, is not one that is readily adaptable to dramatic treatment: it is distinctly a pictorial subject. Considering, then, the fact that in art it was a subject familiar for at least two or three centuries before the play, it seems all but inevitable that we should come to the conclusion that the play was simply an attempt to dramatize the iconographic *Tree of Jesse*.

JOHN K. BONNELL.

¹⁴ "Roboam" und "Jese" fanden sich auch unter den Propheten im englischen Ludus Coventriae . . . Durand hat klargestellt, was Sepet nicht bestimmt genug hervorhob, dass das Eindringen der Vorfahren Christi in die Reihe der Propheten Christi auf die Liturgie des Weihnachtsfestes zurückzuführen ist, in welcher die Genealogie Christi von alters her zur Verlesung kam. Die in mittelalterlichen Kirchen, namentlich auf Glasfenstern, so beliebte Darstellung der Vorfahren Christi ist also wieder ein Beweis für den innigen Zusammenhang zwischen Liturgie und bildender Kunst im Mittelalter (*Geistliches Schauspiel und Kirchliche Kunst*, Stuttgart, 1894).

¹⁵ Ernst Falke, *Die Quellen des sog. Ludus Coventriae*, Leipzig, Reudnitz, 1908.